Of Artists and the Arts

Poems

by

Ann Struthers

The Struthers Family
Cedar Rapids, IA

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Introduction

Eleanor Ann Struthers, Ph.D. (1930-2024), an author, teacher, wife, and mother of four, was an energetic and enthusiastic lover of life. Born and educated in Iowa, she lived most of her life there, completing degrees at Morningside College and the University of Iowa. During the second half of her teaching career, she offered courses in American and Middle Eastern Literature and in creative writing at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, IA.

At her death on 24 February 2024 she left many typescripts of poems, published and unpublished, that were never collected in a published volume. As her close friend for many years, I agreed with her children to attempt completing several of her collections for some form of publication that would make her work more accessible.

Throughout her career, she wrote and published poems about works of visual art and music, and about artists and the making of art, including the art of writing, but in the Ann Struthers papers at Coe College, there is not a collection that she made of her many poems about art and artists. This volume, then, brings together her poems about the fine arts, presenting them in alphabetical order.

She also wrote poems about the lives of writers, one group of which was collected in *The Alcott Family Arrives*. These mainly biographical reflections on writers appear in separate new collection: *The Lives of Writers.*

In the few cases where publication information appears with the text, this has been included. Dates for a few poems appear in typescripts or indicate the last date an electronic text was saved.

Terry Heller
Coe College
2026

Admonition to the Self

To all who deny gravity, deny the circulation of the blood,
deny Aristotle, deny Peter's vision of the table,
I address you and say:
Celebrate banjoes, praise the oboe, extol the mouth harp
that fits in a shirt pocket.
Remember the ribald songs of the Johns Hopkins physicists,
bad jokes of the Workshop writers, the band master's convention
sailing the *Queen* on Okoboji,
warm summer nights when kisses were mandatory,
the moon said mandatory, the breeze said required,
and your lips sang lyrics of water while all the stones danced.
Praise sunrise, revere sundown,
recall the comet on the horizon,
its brief trail of sparks, bless the stars whose light
reaches us now, although they are dead for a million years.

After Resolving to Write a Poem a Day

I owe the Muses three poems.
I don't know when I can pay.
They start charging interest,
or they may repossess my computer,
my pencils, my yellow legal pad,
even the kitchen table where I write
in long hand when the computer
balks, refuses to produce verse,
its words escaping like moths
shaken out from last winter's sweater,
although its diodes are clear red and green,
but no green words, no red exclamation marks
come. Well repro ladies if you knock
on my door, I'll write out a check
on the blood bank, because writing is work
for which I sweat white and red corpuscles.
I'd rather chop wood or churn butter
on a day when butter elves prevent the cream
than write when the poem won't come.
I've birthed babies easier than some poems,
even that ten pound girl
who grew up and married a good-for-nothing.
I owe you three poems — if you'll just wait till tomorrow?

After the Rain

I sit on the porch holding a book by Henry James,
look out at the green-washed clearing, the forest beyond
Rain from the shower just passed
scents the air. The sun wheels down the west,
thirty degrees above the horizon.
Its almost horizontal rays light the clear drops
suspended from each needle of the hemlock.
Each one hangs there defying gravity and evaporation,
more iridescent than crystal.
Such profusion! Such order!
I think if I shouted,
they would fall simultaneously.
Not even a breeze whispers.
I wait in perfect happiness
which cannot last long.

Against Ornamentation

Notice how the old poets go for the jugular,
direct to the major artery, no ornamenting around
the obvious or making it prettier. Blake says,
"O rose, thou art sick!" And Shakespeare declares,
"Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds...."
Milton is adamant, "Hell, her numbers full,
Thenceforth shall be forever shut." They don't mince
or qualify.

They learned, of course, from the old prophets..
Jesus said, "Consider the lilies of the field."
No glorious, silent trumpets, no heralds of wild, unbound beauty,
no timorous bells wafting in the sweet Palestinian breeze.
only, "Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as such as these."*

It takes a long time for you
to finally shut the door on baroque embellishments,
to leave the country of adjectives.
It takes a long time to find your way back to the trunk
stripped of all its branches, leaves and bark,
back to the place where you can go no further,
the heartwood.

Note

Luke 12:27 in the King James Bible reads: " … even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

All Roads are Imagination
Sky above Clouds
Georgia O'Keefe, Chicago Art Institute

New York
across the hinterland
to Taos.
Georgia O'Keefe, Hies the cloud pavements.

"...the clouds that pass...up there...up there..."
says Baudelaire.

She captures them.
sets them down as solidly as Romans set the stones
on the Appian Way.
Stretches a canvas across her garage wall.
Paints from a tall ladder,
intent from first light
till last light.
Ruskin, Clouds "...perpetual comfort and exalting of the heart..."

At the top, pale sunrise;
at the middle she works from a platform.

Brushes seven shades of white
Ice white
Mother-of-pearl white
Pre-dawn white
Rabbit white
Feather white
Bride white
Sound of silence white

Stands on a table as she works her way down the canvas,
then on *a* box,
sits on a small Mexican chair,
kneels on the earth.

to record the highway.

The Amateur Poet and the Critics

Some in the audience saw her halo,
her chin chalk white,
and her goodness glowing
although goodness could not redeem
the vague holes in her poems,
but my goodness must. It will not
fill her empty spaces and so you
must add your good will and all the charity
in both our scarred hearts.
We must squeeze them like turnips
until wine runs from them like blood,
like tears.

American Landscape
Etching at the Des Moines Art Museum

Edward Hopper's American Landscape
shows cows climbing a railroad embankment
to cross the tracks to home — upper story
of a New England farm house visible
above the unnatural welt on the landscape.
You know these animals are in danger
from steel tracks, iron locomotive,
technology which will send the people in the house
to the mills, to the enormous racket of factories,
to lonely diners where they will drink their coffee black
in company of empty chairs, bare tables,
the poverty of night, cut off from placid pastures,
hay-scented barns, the care of animals
which companions all creatures,
assuages some of the sorrow of being human.

The Angel Behind Her
Marguerite Zorach's
Portrait of Marianne Moore

Marianne wears an open black satin jacket,
peach blouse, pale blue scarf,
her posture that of a stained glass window.
Her mother wears unadorned black.
They sit in twin chairs, her mother behind her.
Marianne's hair is red, her mother's faded red,
their eyebrows and eyes alike.
Marianne's hands lay in her lap,
her long, delicate fingers together.

Her mother holds one hand to her temple,
the other grips the chair's arm.
Her lips are grim. Marianne's mouth is set firmly.
Mrs. Moore is her daughter's good angel
or her bad one. They are struggling
for Marianne's soul, and Marguerite Zorach
who painted them in 1925 saw
which woman would win.

Angels of the Fogg

On Christmas Eve the angels wake and climb
out of their frames in the Fogg Museum,
eager as children, anxious for this time.
(The rich and comfortable can't see them.)
They sing, play, make manifest their pageant
for the few. Listen, you can hear feathers
sweeping through the frosty air. They present
their celebration for sisters, brothers
who live in doorways where all hope has ceased,
who sleep on stony sheets, eat trash-can bread,
who've lost their wits, their loves, their old beliefs,
who scarcely know if they're alive or dead.

These hear the angels' songs, the harps strumming,
and see the fire of their second coming.

Ardor for the Lie

"Ned tells that the Clock purrs
and the Kitten ticks.
He inherits his Uncle Emily's ardor for the lie."
Dickinson

Plato would have banished you, Emily,
and Walt, Edgar Allan, all those who came after you,
Marianne, Elizabeth, William Carlos, T.S.,
Robert of the distinguished ancestors,
Anne and Sylvia,

But Plato's hourglass didn't purr or tick;
my bedside clock splats, like a faucet dripping,
and its numbers glow red like hearth fires
outside the walls of the Acropolis
in the huts of the Plaka
where the poets give birth in pain,
where they trudge out every morning
to dig and delve in the thistle-choked fields,
blooming with stiff purple blossoms
and poppy-red lies.

At the Symphony, Valentine's Eve

"Lunatics and Lovers Overture" with Titania befuddled in fiddles
and Bottom braying in the French horn.
Then Michael Wayne and his clarinet bring
the river's reeds, branches of weeping willow
dangling in the clear water of the violins, the cellos
chanting a new theme. Wayne's clarinet catches it,
shakes it out like a banner, floats it across the auditorium.
Wayne dips and circles, he is snake and snake charmer,
weaves with the allegro, adagio, and rondo.

This is Mozart's composition for his friend, Stadler,
who invented the basset clarinet, its range
one-fourth lower than today's standard. Now no one knows
what deep notes Mozart heard in his Vienna atelier,
the signed manuscript lost. We must imagine them
deep in the bowels of the bass.

Wayne's face pasty in the stage lights — it must be the stage lights —
suddenly a forgotten dream flashes through my mind:
faces of two friends, one jaundice yellow. I know it's fatal.
Years ago I sat at a table for eight in the church hall
and looking at my friends there, saw that I would outlive them all,
unhappy for the terrible loneliness sans family, friends.

After intermission Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde,"
passion wild as the waves of the sea rocking their small boat,
trombones and sousaphones.
Then Tchaikovsky's "Francesca De Rimini," with Dante
visiting the second circle, clamor and chaos, whirlwind of hell,
the viola's gone mad, thunder levitating cellos and basses,
and Francesca's mournful clarinet solo, the terrible hunting horn
when her cruel hunchback husband discovers the lovers
and slaughters them.

Note

This poem may be incomplete. There is reason to believe there was one more stanza to end it.

The Avenger

Bronze, the accordion folds of his monk's robe,
horizontal, leaning into his stride
in pursuit of the enemy. The machete
above his head, ready to strike.
His face the snake's face, vengeance
transfiguring him. God saves revenge
for God, keeping the sweetest.
The rest of us wait.
Those who don't, taste poison.

Basketry

The Baskets of Superstition

I

Willow and witch come from the same root,
oh golden bough, and she soaks the strands
and bends them toward her invisible pattern,
curves a handle for it so she can carry
wormwood from the fields, mandrake from the forest.
Yesterday no mushrooms, but this morning their white
erections
pierce the leaf mold. She gathers these into a basket,
and where her skirt touches, tomorrow there will be more,
What sorcery does she hide beneath those lids?
I dare not turn the pins to open them.
Remember, Cleopatra's asp came in a basket of figs,
packed in the dark among the sweet purple globes,
he with his final sweetness.

II

The souls of the Dyaks
hide under leaves and stones on the ground.
Their enemies gather them in flax straw baskets
and beat them to death, the spirit screams
so terrible that the priests
must plug their ears with mud.

Do not stand where your enemy's child
can make cross hatches on the ground in your shadow.
Your soul will be caught in the pictograph basket
and your body will never find it
after the child wipes the drawing
into the secret earth with his bare foot.

III

The Baskets of Faith

The Monks at Memphis
310 A.D.

St. Paul the Anchorite came to St. Anthony of Thebes
at the desert monastery at Memphis, and St. Anthony,
to test the prospective monk's patience and obedience,
bade him make baskets.

I see them now, these fanatic early Christians,
not content to die by Roman swords or live by Roman standards,
they sit cross-legged in the sunlit courtyard,
the stiff palm fronds and cactus fibers soaking in water
to make them pliable. They shape them into something
new and useful. How they weave the patterns of hope,
the strand of faith stained with red
is worked through every border
The flames that burn above their brows inform the shapes,
baskets to hold fish and bread
for the whole world.

Being There

I would have liked to have been there
when Mary Cassatt held her Sunday afternoon
soirees in her Paris studio, and Amy Alcott,
Louisa May's sister, came to sip tea,
to listen to Mary speak of Degas,
those two so very proper
they could not be lovers, even in Paris.

Or when William James, his hammock
on the deck, with the [*unrecognized handwritten word*]
as they steam up the Amazon
searching for proof of Louis Agassiz's theory
that the Southern Hemisphere, too, was once
covered with glaciers, hears
the great naturalist say,
"This is the way to live."

Or in 1929 Berlin, Einstein carrying his violin
to musicians' parties, hoping they'd ask him
to play. The night Anita Sujovolsky
was assigned second fiddle, Einstein first,
Emmanuel Feuerman on cello, and Paul Hindemith viola,
Einstein couldn't navigate the Mozart score.
Anita switched with him, and Leonard Shure,
who was there, saw Einstein get through it,
thrilled as a small child.

And in one sense I was there,
hearing Mozart's concerto leap
out of the black notes on the score
and into the wash of the waves,
and the flow of theories wild,
and false, and beautiful,
tasting it on the rim
of the pale China tea cup,
the artist holds in her exquisite hands.

The Big Mouths Of The Prophets

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets....."

I
Jeremiah Preaching in Egypt (Prophet Against Profits)

When he prayed he set his big mouth
against their beasts of the Nile
They crept at his bidding onto the bank
lay down and died.
The Egyptians loved him.

His mistake: set his big mouth against their idols,
Mut, Ra, Amun-Ra, and Horus — .
excoriated local Hebrew traders
who bowed their knees for profit.

Back in Jerusalem
the traders
paid the thugs who stoned him to death.
He and his big mouth.

IV
Habakkuk (messenger with lunch)

Only lentils and onions, Habakkuk
stirred for his stew — when suddenly appeared
that angel with message, "Good news , good luck."

"That's what you always say." The prophet feared

the command he knew the shining angel
brought from the Commander. "What dangerous
journey, what incendiary message, what Bengal
Tiger must I wrestle, adventurous

army fight? What desert cross, slog what fen?"
"I'll fly you to Babylon with your stew
for Daniel, starving in the Lion's Den."
"Lion's Den too dangerous, no thank you."

Whisked to Babylon, delivered stew, spoon.
Back home, his pronouncements became suspect —
the Great rejected his prophecy. His doom
was set. They stoned him on the temple steps

Note

These two poems on prophets were separated in the files, but they seem to belong to a group of poems about prophets. Probably there are others, but they do not appear in the Ann Struthers Papers.

Black Death

The monk, Gheado, buried his prior and 34 others
from the monastery. The holy oil exhausted
after the first twenty-nine. God forgive him,
he used cooking oil. The only one left,
he prayed for death while he dug the last graves.
But Death would not accept him.
After that he wandered specter-like
through Montpelier's hills.
His dog trailed along, tail drooping.
His elder brother, Petrarch, mourned Laura
of the golden hair. I think he refused to know
how she died, whether vomiting blood
or from black lumps beneath her white arms,
between her unimaginable thighs.

In Florence, Giovanni Vilani, the great historian,
slumped over his ink pot, in the middle of a sentence,
his pen leaking a black blot on the parchment.
Edward III's little blond daughter, Joanna,
married the King of Death in Bordeau before she met
her intended.

Peasants dropped dead, rakes in their hands.
Wolves came down from the Alps
to prey on the weakened flocks.

An English bishop gave permission
for lay people to hear confessions,
"and if no man is present then even a woman."
A woman hearing confession! although most women
had heard more confessions than the parish priests,
understood folly better than the cloth and collar,
living amidst the fopperies of this foolish world.
Nobody wept; "there were no tears left,
for all expected death." The authorities forbade
the tolling of death bells.

But the world didn't end then; I don't believe
it's ending now, although Mother and Father are dead,
and dear David, Little Fred before I knew him.
Yesterday I sat at table with seven long-time friends
and I read on the wall where everything is written
that I would be witness at their funerals.

I promise I'll complain, object,
weep, rail at the unfairness.
If necessary, I'll hear confessions, give absolution,
although my doubts are my only absolute.
But this is a warning: I will not keep silence.
I'll whistle for Ghaedo's dog
when the wolves come down;
I'll shout it to the sheep,
before I climb the tower to pull the rough rope
that turns the wheels of the indomitable bells.

Blowing Up the Moon

"Why not blow up the moon?"
Professor Alexander Abian

Professor Abian asks, "Why not blow up the moon?
use debris to mold a lump on South America,
change tilt of earth; get rid
of inconvenient tides tugging at madness, menses;
no more deserts, those solitary places where Jews found God,
Greeks mathematics; abolish chilly winters,
those inconvenient seasons of snow crystals,
water's metamorphosis, storms out of Saskatchewan;
change earth's monotonous orbit, the twenty-four hour
day lengthened, year extended;
combine Venus and Mars. Novelty is everything;
the experiment supreme.

We do not need that pale lady who stalks clouds;
lovers clothed in silvery light;
luminous globe in drunk's fishpond;
poets and children must learn to cope,
night without remorse, without pity.

Blue Goods

Cotton-Goods Land
Woodcut by Hiroshige

Two geisha, holding their kimonos at a rakish angle,
their faces pointing one direction, their clogs another,

tipsy from drinking with their samisen clients;
their maid follows, her eyebrow lifted in concern.

The cotton shop they pass holds two merchants seated
before their stacks of blue goods, tallying receipts.

Constantly, something else going on somewhere,
the business of life, its energy, motion,

stupidity, beauty, its dailiness depicted
truthfully, a little time caught in the dark

or the rain or beneath the bridge, drunk or sober, old
or young, with the umbrella

or the umbrella forgotten, and always
somebody counting the money.

Blueprint for Fishermen
Painting by Marvin Cone
in the Coe College Library

In a flat grey frame, two blue academicians
with hungry Shakespearian looks:
one leans over a building, the other towers
against it. Their noses triangles, their jaws
parallelograms, hold fishpoles with yellow lines
extending off the canvas into the imaginary river
Their mortar boards askew, they contemplate
whether to footnote the reference of Cato,
how to translate the Walloon history of weavers,
formulae for teaching principles of aerodynamics.
Prisms of blue swim the air around them;
these intellectual fish will jump on their hooks
but those others, invisible in the painting,
will swim on, hide in dark pools
of the Cedar River, wait for the bait*
of imagination.

Notes

Struthers's typescript includes penciled alternatives to replace "the bait."
- a wilder bait
- lures of imagination
- the delicate whirligig lure of imagination.

Brady's Glass Plates

After the War of the Rebellion was finished
nobody wanted to see
all Brady had carefully recorded —
ten thousand photographic plates sold
to nurserymen for building greenhouses.

Smokey images of amputated limbs
tossed in piles; six Confederate corpses
sprawl on Matthews Hill after first
Battle of Bull Run; Allen Pinkerton in top hat
inspects a bridge; the dead of 24th Michigan Infantry,
the day after Gettysburg, their bodies beginning
to swell; Confederate caisson mules lying,
legs askew, among axel trees, shredded
harness, splintered wagons — hit
by a shot from Marye's Heights siege gun;
General Kearney's wounded soldiers at Fredericksburg,
all on crutches, stand outside a brick school;
Allen Pinkerton with cigar;
Captain George Custer with his first prisoners,
Lieutenant J. B. Washington, his classmate
at West Point, and Washington's slave boy;
General Grant in the field,
saddled horses form a semi-circle
around church benches set out
in the shade, Grant evaluating staff reports;
Brady under fire at Petersburg, stands behind
first gun of Battery B, First Pennsylvania
Light Artillery, taken by Tim O'Sullivan;
Allen Pinkerton with pipe;
last train from Atlanta, 1864;
Fort Sumter after bombardment, 1865;
ruins of Richmond, 1865; deadline fence
at Andersonville, skeletal survivors
like survivors of Auschwitz.

Brady's grey glass filters sun
ripens hothouses vegetables, propagates pear trees
sets carnations blossoms, redder than Minie ball
wounds, images of the dead giving
all they have for the living, like the great cemeteries
at Vicksburg, Manassas, Shiloh.

Cartes de Visite

Long lines of soldiers wait for the war to begin;
in Brady's reception rooms in Washington,
wait their turn to be photographed,
to buy their own portrait on calling cards to be left
on the hall tables of ladies, to send home,
to save to show years later to their children.
Generals stand with privates,
only Lincoln photographed out of turn.
Brownell, in his Zouave uniform with rifle
and bayonet. Next, a nameless Union private,
wide-brimmed, low crowned hat, dark blue coat;
he is young, looks seventeen and scared.
Behind him, Lt. Col N. L. Farnham, who lounges
against fake Roman column, his cap tilts rakishly.
That same day, General Kimball, seated,
his left hand in the Napoleonic position;
General Joseph Kiernan in full dress uniform
right hand on his sword.

In June, 1861, after the first payday,
drunken Fire Department Zouaves shoot out
store windows with Navy Colts, jump gentlemen's carriages
and whip off in them, pick fights, smash saloons,
raid brothels without leaving their cards.

His head beneath the camera's black curtains,
Brady thinks of ways to photograph the war.
"A spirit in my feet says, 'Go'..."
and although he cannot name them
when he sees them again, some
of the men who stand in his studio
will lie down for their next portrait.

Catlin in London

The maw of the teepee is dark. Catlin stands
before it in buckskins, palette over his thumb,
easel before him. William Fisk calls up
Iron Horn and Woman Who Strikes Many
from Catlin's paintings to stand behind him.
Fisk imagines the wigwam village stretching
out on the right, all the Indian nations changing,
disappearing before Catlin catches them in paint,
the way of life being eaten by the ravenous jaws
of *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*.
Even from London, the British Fisk could see it.

China Hand

This ceramic woman's right hand
on a pedestal — once a glove display
holds itself upright like a traffic cop's.
Stop! it says. Now! Insists,
Look what you've done to me.
Bound my feet, crippled my mind.
Girls not taught to read for centuries.
Prohibited access to classical education,
which was the only education.
Girls got a little music, drawing,
a little French, of no consequence, embroidery
with sharp needles. Stop!

Denied the vote. Stupidest man could cast his ballot
for the stupidest candidate, but Emily Dickinson,
brightest mind of her generation could not.
This hand says, Stop!

Dismissed Beatrix Potter's work on fungi, drove
her to Peter Rabbit. Women circumscribed
by Küche, Kirche, und Kinder,
chained to the cookstove, tied
to the church, composite refuge and oppressor,
wearing for centuries the weights of children —

Why can't you love me? Why won't you vote for me?
Why won't you allow priestly ministrations
from mothers who have ministered for centuries?

If children are so wonderful,
why don't you want to care for them?
Accept me, equal but different.
This white hand speaks in vitreous voice,
like me, like all of us, breakable.

Closer than Your Shadow
Riddle Poem

I come with the first spank,
leave with a final rattle,
invisible, self-effacing, blank,
Essential for shouts, for prattle,
or easy conversation. Rich,
poor know me equally, I'm like air
of apple blossom spring, Or garlic,
stinking. If you are living, I'm there.

Columbus in Spain

In 1486 Columbus came to Cordoba
to wait for Isabella's largess,
made his headquarters at apothecary
shop of Leonardo and Lucian Esbarroya,
fellow Genoese, where local intellectuals
came to listen to the ruddy-faced sailor
convince them the world was round,
the Indias off beyond the horizon
which had no drop-off shelf,
its immense wealth ripe for the plucking.
Rodrigo Cervantes and his son,
who would become the father
of Miguel, sit in the sun at the door
of the shop, listen, argue, think.
It runs in the family — this attraction
to the absurd, affection for the fanatic,
belief in the impossible.
And bad luck.

Wealth falls through Cervantes' family fingers
like water — Miguel's father, almost completely deaf,
becomes an itinerant barber-physician,
moves from town to town, escaping
his creditors. Miguel mangles his left hand
in the first battle he fights at Lepanto,
on the way home, captured by Moorish pirates,
made a slave in Algiers for five years.
Ransomed, finally gets work from the king buying grain
but the banker, keeping his government funds
embezzles it, and Miguel is thrown in jail.
He doesn't get along with his wife. Her family
mistrusts him. Another author writes a sequel
to his only popular work, but still
Miguel leaves a legacy: this expansive dreamer,
this knight who operates on a larger-than-this-world
scale, the Columbus of La Mancha, who did not know
the true country he had found — the Indies
of laughter.

The Composer Complains

Recalcitrant measures, rhythm's staunch guard,
instrument's limits: these discipline hard.
I would rather be skating on thin ice
or dancing, eating cake, paying the price
for sweet leisure — if I had the money,
my friends would laugh when my jokes weren't funny.
The best waiters would show me deference;
I would be filthy rich, unrepentant.
Why stare at silent keys, the music rack,
blank staff paper in hand, a five line track
for a slow locomotive not on time
that may have jumped the rails down the line?

Why practice, sculpt, paint, write, throw pottery?
Get undeserved wealth from the lottery.

Cooper's Battery B,
1st Pennsylvania Light Artillery
June, 1864

Cpl. James A. Gardner, pictured by Brady
at Petersburg, sights the gun on far left.
"If the enemy is engaging us, as soon as each gun
is loaded the cannoneers drop to the ground,
protect themselves as best they can.
Gunners and officers are expected
to be always on the lookout.
All the officers in this picture are dead."

Frassanito's modern photographs
of the site show a corn field
stripped after harvest, leaves shredded,
stalks bent or lying broken on the ground.
To the north is the ridge where Rebs
set up their last defense.
Now there's a flying saucer watertower
on stilts above the ground where the farmer
still plows up Minie balls. When June
comes around each year, you might think
you see lightning, but it's a cannon's flash,
guns' ghostly thunder.

Young corn grows in furrows like regiments,
loam still rich from blood, shattered bone.

Dancing with the Devil

"The leader of the band gives
Mephistopheles his fiddle."
Richard Rodda-Program Notes for Liszt's "Mephisto Waltz, No. 1"

Once Mephistopheles puts the violin beneath his chin,
once his long red fingers touch the strings,
the bow leaps across them, licks them with tongues
of fire. The dancers kick up their toes; St. Elmo's
lightning skitters across the ceiling.

They stomp, bawl, contort, rub themselves against
each other, all inhibitions gone, and the girl
of the brown eyes like hazelnuts takes Faust's hand,
dances gladly with him into the woods. The music
plays the will-o-wisp, hay stacks burning,
stars falling, and love like comets bursting.

The next morning none of the dancers dare to look
at each other; for weeks can't go to church.
And there are still old women who say
that at midnight the shoes of the devil dancers
cavort by themselves, shuffling, hopping,
skipping and leaping, piling up by the barred door,
still trying to reach the dark roots
of the forest.

Dangerous Music

When Catherine Holtzman plays her black-necked harp,
its pregnant belly's sounding board settled
against her shoulder, then her fingers dart,
pull, pluck, strike taut strings, her feet tap pedals,
dance the gypsy dances. Her notes swirl, stir
grey depths, search secret roots, then their white
c's call like voices of the dead, conjure
ancient musicians back from graves tonight —
invisible .

Be careful when you leave;
hold your ribs tight beneath your coat. Linger
in the hall, but keep your arms safe in sleeves.
Ghosts of old composers pose a danger;
after years as dust, they'll steal a
single ear or eye; they're desperate for fingers.

Discipline

Preparation of Materials for Weaving
Mesquaki Nettle Bags

Gather nettles after frost's white mouth
sucks out the sting; suspend
them four days in river's running water.
Take them out and dry. Beat
them with stones. Stomp
them with heavy feet
until only the unrepentant strings are left.
Then they are ready for weaving.

After life has dredged you,
dried you, pummeled you,
then you are ready to understand
how to use what's left of you.

Drifting Tree

In No-Two-Horn's painting,
it is almost sunset.
Sitting Bull, wearing fringed buckskin,
homed feather headdress, dances
beside Custer's body —
the bluejacket, gold epaulets,
blond moustache and beard,
eyes staring wide open.
Custer's soul (Woniya) is drifting away
from his lips and forming a young tree.

George Armstrong Custer of the Last Stand,
how stand you now? And where?
Red Fish painted you on horseback,
decked out as a Comanche.
Did you have an Indian *tunj*?

When the Fifth Cavalry arrived with
Buffalo Bill and Captain Jack
at the awful battlefield, were you
already a cottonwood? Or were you
with the other dead chiefs in Valhalla?
Or does your spirit still wander
along the Grand River, as the Sioux say,
searching for your golden curls?

Drum

Only God sets the rhythm, creates the time
for the music; beats out cadenzas,
rips, rattles, roars, booms, blares, taps tattoos,
tan tans, tan tumps, tan bippity turn turn trumps,
spreads palms on its delicate head and lets silence
swallow the enemies.
Jealous God retains vengeance for God,
but God's name is word in the beginning,
so those whose business is also words put their ears
to the timpani's skin, tighten the screws,
tap at the edges.
FOR THE WORD IS THE MOST DANGEROUS WEAPON.
Eskimo drum matches pit two enemies
against each other, alternately hurling verses
of ridicule and abuse which can lead to exile
even death.

Words can kill; can immortalize as well,
engender disapprobation, centuries of disgust,
eternal ridicule.

There should be warning signs on writers' doors:
BEWARE OF THE WRITER.
Villon named Bishop Thibault, his torturer,
named the water torture, the iron pear.
In The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth
Shakespeare froze in time his old enemy,
Shallow, who convicted him for poaching.

Yeats names the traitor McBride.
Someday I will gather the courage
to name the one-hundred-pounds-overweight
department chair, addicted to gossip and deception;
the professor who wouldn't teach,
too busy writing pornography
pseudo-anonymously for Hustler;
the parent who beat the child;
the parent who wouldn't defend her.
Give writers enough words and time,
a little tattoo on the side of the drum,
a fast roll on the snare when God's back is turned,
and the enemies' names will be blazoned with infamy.

Easy to Hold

A good pen has a proper mouth.
a steady flow of words from
the Hyperion springs
or from the ever-flowing Artesian Well
at Belmond, Iowa, cold, pure.
sweet. Easy to hold as a lover.
faithful as my old dog,
kind to his friend, Paper,
and never at a loss for words.

Educational Exhibit
Painting by Marvin Cone
in the Coe College Library

At carnival's educational exhibit
wind-distorted canvas painted
with a pealing fat lady, a pin-cushion man,
hides monstrous marvels.

All foreground faces unnatural: carnival barker's
celery green, white clown's elongated.
Spectators, middle-aged men, pasty-faced, gaze up
at the platform, round mouths open;
two ladies wearing stiff feather hats,
iron lips, turn away.

Only the barker's girl
appears in natural colors,
a large blacksnake coiled around her.
It is the early 1930's and she wears
a daring two piece bathing suit,
has shamelessly bobbed hair,
green eyeshadow, leans forward slightly,
displays cleavage.

Strings of colored electric bulbs
illuminate tired little town,
hucksters shout, merry-go-round music thumps,
Ferris wheel turns thrills. In the shadows
on the right, a man kisses a girl
who may not really like him,
but the night's magic transforms him,
and she feels changed, too, knows
she wears a new dress of colors
the gaudy lights play on her silk.

Flight to Egypt

Enamel Plaque by Jean Penicaud

Joseph, lumpy bag of belongings
tied to his bent back, staff on his shoulder,
stable cow ambling beside him, leads the donkey.
Mary rides, holding the infant whose halo
lights the forest's silvered tree trunks;
a palm bows a bunch of dates into her hand.
Golden poppies unroll a carpet before them.
In a cloud of acanthus leaves above the trees
cherubs play their instruments and sing.
Breath from their beating wings wafts
the folds of her blue cloak. One plays the lap harp,
one, castanets. The alto who strums the lute
looks like Jordan Cecilia who waited to be born now,
but Jean Penicaud who made this enamel plaque
at Limoges about 1588 had seen her, heard her voice,
shaped her into the copper before he painted
and fired it — 400 years before she shrugged off
her feathers and came to us. She will save us,
I think, from selfishness, despair, from baubles
and gadgets the world calls worthy but which are hollow,
a heap of rusted tin beside her petal face.

Note

About this poem, Struthers' daughter Mary Dittmer wrote: I love this poem. She sometimes wove historic events, people, places, nature and her grandchildren or children into her poems. It connects generations, traditions, family, faith, hope, and love into the stories. As generations of families come and go it creates a purpose and ideas that I love. Sometimes, when she looked at us, I could tell she was writing the poem in her mind -- she would look through us and see us, see our potential and spirit, our soul. I love that Jordan Cecelia is woven into this one.

[Flight into Egypt, another version.]

Enameled Plaque by Jean Penicaud, 1588

Joseph, apprehensive, bent,
their belongings lumped on his back,
staff over his shoulder, the stable cow
beside him, leads the donkey.
Mary rides, holds the infant
whose halo lights their path
through the forest of palms,
their trunks silvered; the nearest one bows down
bunches of dates to her reach. Golden poppies
sprout at their feet, bloom before them. The folds
of her cloak float behind her. Above in a cloud
of acanthus leaves cherubs play castanets,
lap harps, and the alto strumming the lute looks
like Jordan Cecilia who waited to be born now —
but Jean Penicaud who made this enamel plaque
a Limoges about 1588, had seen her, heard her voice,
shaped her face into the copper and then colored it
300 years ago before she shrugged off
her feathers and came to us, a gift made precious
by that first gift and a journey.

She will save us, I think, from selfishness,
from despair, from baubles and gadgets the world
calls worthy and which are hollow,
a heap of broken glass and rusted tin
beside this petal face which breathes hope.

Enchanted

when poetry was magic, the Irish Bards

When Seanchan Torpest wound up, cursed
the rats with his satiric verse,
they fell dead from the thatch, ten first
and then ten more, caught and immersed
with no escape, trapped in the purse
of poetry — black magic bursts
of malice, dangers, but the worst:
he also trapped my heart with mirth,
ah, love, that was the very worst.

1/30/18

Eskimo Sealskin Stencil Print

shows an archer, legs straddled for balance;
he holds the bow with his left,
with his right, the arrow
aimed toward four birds above him —
his quiver, like a tame bird lashed
to his back, points its beak
the same direction as the wild birds flying.

Excuses

I'm writing a bad poem
because I can't write a good one this morning
because Apollo isn't hovering over the back of my chair
begging me to jump into bed as soon as I'm finished.
No Muses around; maybe they used up all their powers
on Homer, Shakespeare and Milton,
on Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman.
Or maybe they're all occupied, whispering
in the ears of important poets, Robert Pinsky,
Billy Collins, Louis Gluck.
Even Pegasus isn't flying over this earth —
he's dancing around on Mars and when Rover
finds his hoof prints, another Hippocrene fountain
will gush forth, pouring out waters of inspiration
and what will the guys at NASA do then?
In the meantime, I am staring at the computer screen
that stands between me and the world's greatest poem —
hiding it from me behind its innocent white face.

False Maps

I think of map makers who drew the world
as a flat disk with hell beneath. In Spain
Christopher Columbus studied the curled
parchment in libraries that explained
forgotten works of Eratosthenes'
round world belief, and read the formuli
that proved it. And he searched the histories
of journeys and discarded those that lied
to confuse rival traders, sink their ships.
I have seen the maps that glaciers left scratched
on stone; the charts on dunes the wind has lipped,
licked, lifted, rearranged; the torn and patched
route my heart has taken. Oh, Columbus,
the sea was roiling at the precipice!

The Farmer Gone Home for Lunch
The Flowering Orchard
by Vincent van Gogh

In *The Flowering Orchard,* rake
leans against a tree,

scythe hangs over a limb,
grass papered with flowers, some yellow,
some white, upright as little tomb stones.

Above us wire holds together branches
that must be supported for the heavy fruit to come.

All is anticipation: apples, Calvados,
tall grass blossoming toward fine hay
for the farmer's fat beef, real and practical.

I taste the apples, the fine roast, brandy
to warm the throat. There will be cash for the crop,

but today is only fragile beauty,
scented air and petals falling on my hair
and strewn in my path as if for a bride.

Fashion
Shitaya Hirokoji Street

Barbershops jut out into the wide street,
appropriate where class status
is marked by hairstyle.

Two deliverymen bend under burdens almost as large
as themselves, packs wrapped in blue cloth imprinted
with the white shop crest.

Three samurai, young dandies, each wearing two swords,
dressed in Western pants, only three years after Perry
sailed into Tokyo Bay.

A procession of girls, students from a dance school
all carry identical parasols, on their way
to view cherry blossoms.

followed by four men servants
carrying their picnic in a box on poles
and in bundles tied up in blue cloth.

The young men's looks follow the girls.
Did the slim beauties notice their swords?
Did they giggle at the new pants?

Finding Yourself

William James toyed with being a painter;
Samuel Morse studied painting with
Washington Allston and Benjamin West,
Even Franklin wrote ballads
before he discovered electricity.
Oh, finding vocation is like finding your lover,
suddenly you give allegiance to a different order,
and what came before seems like ancient history
beside your new discovery — now the past seems pallid,
And you discard it and launch into your best
ideas with jest,* with pleasure, savor it's pith
and its juices, the exhilaration of its flavors.

Note
Perhaps Struthers intended "zest?"

Flashlight Drawing

A rose for the Jellicles
embroidered by Sewell
while they dance, furry, angelical,
sly and feline, not fools
for Heaven, their movements grace,
sinewy cats, and secret
the night's comrade, the moon's pet,
gliding past the muddy wallow
of the reverend hippopotamus,
that Nonsense shovel swallow,
gunned by a hiatus.
A rose for O'Riley
and proper Mr. Eliot
A medal for Sewell,
who hasn't told it all yet.

Flying High

Bellerophon, doer of many brave deeds
a hero who has slain the chimaera,
won the king's daughter, (she's pretty but not a goddess)
has been named successor to the throne,
(but it's not Olympus),
knows he's a favorite of the gods
(but he would be a god).
He is handsome, his hair curly, his shoulders rippling
with muscles, his sword arm the strongest in Lycia.
He guides the golden bridled Pegasus toward heaven,
Bellerophon, extended horizontally,
about to fly, only one foot on Pegasus' wing —
the wing like a sail, a keel,
the horse turning,
stung by the gadfly, circling home and Bellerophon,
swimming the bright air, will fall, break his ankle,
hit his head on rocks, stumble lame and blind thereafter.
Ovid says a miserable death, but that comes later.
Here now, one moment of god-like grace before
the winged horse of the Muses throws him.

Form and All

I have been faithful in my fashion, Sestina,
Your challenge delights me more than terza rima,
More than tercets, triplets and ottava rima.

I confess that I dallied with sonnets. As well
I flirted with ballads, haiku, French villanelle,
Canzone, chant royal, the couplet, the carol,

But loved you best, difficult, dangerous, quirky — None
have the strength of your magnificent body,
And nothing desirable as your muscular envoi!

The Form of a Liar

Lying on my desk, oh latitudinal tower,
your truth is impugned, your insight
suspect because that eraser for errors
is hugging your mis-named graphite!

(pencil)

Going Down

Every day winch squeals, gears ratchet,
descending the solitary shaft tunneled
into caverns of swirled ivory and caramel
stalagmites and stalactites,
growing toward each other syllable by syllable,
where words like fireflies are switched on by darkness.
There the swift streams of imagination
where blind fish swim
and shadows shifting in the torchlight,
hide the perpetrator.

Later, clearing the desk,
ascending to the present, sometimes only water
in my pockets, sometimes fool's gold,
pebbles, pink quartz, amethysts,
a rock crystal prism mined from midnight
that shatters sunlight, spills its secrets
across the floor.

The Great Poets

For Christian Wiman

Brave enough to stand out alone under the stars
to listen to the crackle of innumerable varieties of ice
drift in the infinitely perilous night sky
where distant galaxies cool,
transfixed with the terrifying splendor
taking the bullets of pain in their chests,
the knives of doubt in their souls,
the ax of despair cleaving their brains
Van Gogh without candles on the hat
"to touch the never-before-touched matter
of which the celestial is made," to hold a dead star
or a living one, to write it down
with blistered fingers.

The Greek Captains

The Greek captains are tired
From hacking Trojans with their swords,
Impaling the enemy on spear points all day long.
As the President says, "It's hard work."

Except for Homer's poetry,
the sand before Troy, soaked in blood,
the towers of Ilium aflame,
the best and benighted alike
rasping their last breaths?
What good came of it?

I think instead of the painters: "Sunflowers^
by poor tormented Van Gogh,
Gauguin's "The Spirit of the Dead Watching."
Chopin coughing blood while composing
"Sonata in B-flat Minor,"
musicians: Fats Waller, piano man, rescued
in New Orleans, the trumpet of Wynton Marsalis,
writers, Amy Clampitt, Ted Kooser,
dancers and ice skaters,
capturing and bringing home
to all of us the heart of fire, the hand of beauty,
the sacred tears of despair,
reminding our human condition, unique,
priceless, just this moment.

Hackberry in Winter

after a woodcut by Hiroshige:
"Aoi Slope, Outside Toranomon Gate"

It's a January night, spillway neat, angular
and cold, making a dark pond where two apprentices

have bathed in the icy water to temper their bodies
and to offer prayers to the gods for the refinement

of their skills. Two portable stalls of noodle sellers,
hung with red lanterns — one for buckwheat noodles

the other for fried-egg-and-mushroom topped noodles.
Pedestrians bob along behind their egg-shaped lanterns.

Flying in a wide Z against the crescent moon,
black geese search for a resting-place.

Hackberry trees, bare of leaves, twigs as black
as the geese and shaped like wings.

In this cold season, I know the hackberry trees
at Great Spirit Lake guard the shore and lean

their branches toward the old gods, near the spot
where Inkpaduta's Council Tree once stood,

an elm for massacres, destroyed years later
by insects, enormity brought down by minutia.

For Hiroshige, two stray dogs wait on the black slope
practicing their refined doggish skills.

Haiku Sestina

Iamb still your good friend,
though I ain't seen you for a long line.
Life better or verse?
I don't want to be anapest,
but did you know your palinode from the villanelle
is hunting ghazals where they trip
among the triolets?
He owed me money,
and you can bet your pantoum
he'll never trochee it back,
although that's a cinquain
Too bad you canzone meet me
on the epithalamium
where we could down a couplet or a quatrain..
Anyway, Calligram says you've gone epic,
that's too ballad,
but you'll come rondeau some day, I think.
You say you can't? I say you canto.
Your loving,
    Strophe

[***Untitled***]

Haiku: Volkswagen Beatle
    easy to park
Quatrain: the family sedan
    Ford or Chevy
Sonnet: the hearse, loaded
    with flowers
Lyric, lyric, lyric, all convertibles
    sun and wind in your hair
Epic: stretch limousine
    for the prom, the wedding.
Abecedarian: 26 wheeler Semi, counting the spares
Sestina: delivery truck, coming
    and going, same route every day,
    (with a wheelbarrow on the back).

Hamlet in the Graveyard

He comes upon that dilatory codger
who pokes about with his spade,
and Hamlet's mood is funereal;
the mounds of bones seem to him cairns
marking the path toward the future,
a thought that gives him gritty satisfaction.
The clown, ridiculous old man
who cannot tell one bone from another,
says he holds Yorick's skull,
and Hamlet believes him.

Hamlet, that skull,
wassail bowl for worms, might have been
some poor peasant, my grandfather who trained
the horses, my grandmother, cook in the castle
kitchen, some slight girl got with child
by a visiting prince,
someone named for the rich black earth
of this country, Mohr.

Where the betrayed dust of Ophelia
sleeps with white flowers
strewn on her bridal bed, there, too,
is the dust of my people.
The mistaken dust of Hamlet
blows randomly across plowed fields
which don't care whether the kingdom was purified,
or the king avenged, or the queen contrite.
It is carried on the mourning wind that I breathe in
for those whose names I'll never hear,
who died for the ghost of a state
when they should have been harvesting
their wheat, milking their black and white cows,
dancing the country dances, embroidering
red aprons, making love, singing to babies,
putting new thatch on their timbered houses.

Harbor

Undefined ships, flying strange flags
come into harbor,
tie up, main hawser, lines affixed
in all the languages of the world
at strange wharves, stretching back
into the blinking lights
of the unknown city.

Words come into the mind
tie up to ideas that lead down dark streets,
into narrow doors, open
where the concertina plays,
the balalaika, the small flutes of Bangkok.
Red, yellow skirts whirl in dance,
glasses clack
the quick flick
of a knife, and blood
on the stone floor —
or touch of a hand, warm
warmer than the wine of Corsica.
The ships move with waves of music,
or maybe the wharves move, not
an illusion, maybe the wharves cast off
in the night, formless ideas
fishing for words.

Holy Places

I cross myself at the gates of the Rijksmuseum.
Surely the presence of Creativity dwells
in this house forever. I could confess
to *The Night Watch,* to the Young Rembrandt,
his halo of rusty hair and to the Old Rembrandt,
his face etched — like mine — with all he has known.
I dip my fingers in the holy water
outside the Van Gogh Museum, that stainless steel mistake,
and inside I would light candles to *Woman Rocking a Cradle.*
and kneel before the Perfect Sunflowers.

Horse and Shield

The word is an old nag
which this bifurcated stick
mounts for the bumpy journey
along the rutted lanes, jogging
and bouncing up and down. Sometimes
a hunter, leaping the stone walls
and fences like a metaphor.
Sometimes harnessed to plow
fields of meaning,
turning up the crow-blue soil in waves
of sounds. Sometimes winged
to fly with Chagall's dreamy women
beside the pale moon, above the trees,
above the church steeple
with its brash chanticleer,
above the pond which is a moon below
against the black land.

The Jews begged for signs, the Greeks
demanded theorems. I stand in my frail flesh
to declare I need neither, but the old hungers
quicken, the old fears burgeon in the gut,
in the memory that watches Pharaoh's
overseers whipping the slaves to the pyramids,
the sun splintering off the Assyrian swords
the fires of Troy crackling for days,
and Genghis Khan's soldiers riding out
of the East like a plague of locusts.
The fear of loving my father, hating my mother,
fear of storms — the sea screaming
and eating boats, fear of night,
the wild cat, the boa constrictor,
the scorpion hiding in its cloak,
fear of castration, fear of death,
fear of annihilation. Only the myth
is my explanation, my protection,
my defense, my shield of Perseus,
my mirror for looking at the perilous world.

How I Developed a White Marigold

After years of Burbankian research,
building numerous glass houses,
carefully fastening paper bags
over ten thousand selected blossoms,
shaking loose their gold dust,
brushing it across hidden stamens
of the fairest of the fair,
all the time learning
patience and perseverance —
but it was the secret message
smuggled into a poem by Robin Chapman
that brought me luck. Now I plant
my moon bleached marigolds
beside the fish pond
where Chinese carp,
(none with the brow of Goethe)
flutter feathery fins
in winking water,
and I think they tell me,
in water ballet hydroglyphics,
"Lies are more important than truth."
The flowers dismiss science,
toss frowzy blond heads,
whisper, "Loss, Beauty, Fiction."

I Can Fly

I can fly in the daylight,
skim just below the ceiling
in the wash from the fan.
At night your touch sends me
hurtling through the slate shingles
and I drift over rooftops like snow,
like a night moth, like a spinner
from the Norway maple.
Like a Chagall woman,
I float like a fish in my green nightgown.

So I meander the high night air,
carry the opal-colored moon like a melon,
the alien space between us momentarily at peace,
restrained by stars.

I Can Fly [another version]

I can fly in the half light,
skim just below the ceiling
in the wash from the fan.
At night your touch sends me
hurtling through the slate shingles
and I drift over rooftops like snow,
like a night moth, like a spinner
from the Norway maple.

In daylight, I walk like your wife,
but now I carry the moon under my arm
like a melon. When you aren't looking
I read my fortune in stardust,
toss meteors like dice,
hitch rides on comets.
I am braver than tigers,
more beautiful than Greek goddesses,
but I am not wise, my earth-bound lover,
because of you, I am not wise.

Inviting Marianne Moore to the Des Moines Art Center

Marianne, you'd love *Maistra,*
penguin-bird-man in polished bronze,
his enormous chest, puffed out with his own importance,
his small head, minute eye, and open mouth. You knew
his ilk, have already named him:
Adam; the critic; the connoisseur; the half-poet —
you too refined to call him half-assed.

Because you wrote "The Pangolin,"
I'd love to loan you the Ibo ant-eater headdress
from the African collection
which you could wear in lieu of your tricorn hat;
its curved wooden scales painted green, red, yellow-gold.
When Elizabeth Bishop invokes you over the Brooklyn Bridge,
you could put on this and surprise her. But if you fly
here, watch out for Pegasus, his pedestal made of bronze
stylized clouds; he is about to bank quickly,
throw prideful Bellerophon. Note the self-satisfied smile.

Inside the foyer there is another horse, a white one,
of course, constructed from dented sheets of tin,
bowed iron fence posts, wrenched pipes.
He has been around the track, Marianne.

I think you'd like best, something small, perfect,
maybe Vija Celmins' *Ocean Surface,* the waves undulating,
sparkling, pulling you toward them as if they did not hide
fisherfolk's graves — or Milton Avery's *Shore Birds,*
the intense blue as deep as the blue off Monhegan Island
where they leave their tracks in the sand.
That's the best most of us can do. Except you, Marianne,
Come, put on the ant-eater hat, fly into Des Moines.

Is
Only a word.
Not blue or green horses running,
Not the delicate shamrock, the pale cream
Basket weave Balleek,
Not the carnelian Bosarik carpet,
Not the basketball player's leaping rim shots,
Not the parabolic arch
Of the home run ball,
Or the lifted eyebrow
Or the smile —
One glance that means more than you said.
Not passion's airy mansions,
Or compassion's modest cabin,
Or wind soughing in the sails, Only *is.*

Then I heard its companion
Echoing through the canyon
With the voice of wolves,
And caught by birds of prey,
repeated on the cold air
Of the snowy steppes:
Is Not. Is Not.

Janus Agri-Altar
sculpture by Beverly Pepper
Iowa State University

Doubleness
of the blade, like the plow,
symbol of Iowa
that tore the prairie, the share that breaks
and binds: liberates soil's richness,
opens passages for the breath
of agriculture; builds barns, silos,
grain elevators, feedlots, hog confinements.
The other side of the share
cuts off buffalo, the Native People,
plows under oceans of red and gold
prairie lilies, all the creatures that lived
in their beneficent shadows.
The wild sacrificed
to the tame, the unexpected to the usual,
meandering path of the fox and coyote
to geometric squares
of the surveyor. This is the instrument
for making straight when everyone knows
the crooked is more beautiful.

Just Be

If you beat a poem long enough
It will squeak, screech, spit out
one or two of its themes.
Torture it and it vomits symbols.
Dismember its body
and count its passionate parts
and you still won't know what it means.

Rather, leave it out in the varnishing rain.
Don't kill the chickens.
Let it dangle in the incandescent air.

The Lacemaker
Bruges, Belgium, 1670

The lacemaker weaves beside the bright casement,
uses the most delicate linen thread
that can be spun only in damp basements
by girls who seldom glimpse sunlight.

Vermeer Van Delft saw such women, such light,
seed stitches, squares and spiders,
lozenges, spirals, leaves and flanges
with fans worked along the border.
She keeps the bobbins untangled, the tension even,
sees the knotted relationships between
the weighted threads at the perimeter
and the parchment pattern pricked out with pins,
makes torchon called beggar's lace.
We are all beggars in this life.

Lacis Insertion
(Italy, first half of the 17th century)
Chicago Art Institute

Lacis insertion with designs in cloth stitch
makes a castle, a princess at the doorway,
soldiers on the ramparts, trumpeters
with slender, banner-hung horns.
Long-legged elephants carry castle-shaped howdas;
peacocks spread enormous tails;
lions with tiny waists, Greek key ears, stalk rampant,
tiny ones carry tasseled tails above their backs.
In the garden: a lady with a falcon on her wrist
that will never fly. Falcon, lion, lady,
you prove what geometric shapes can say,
what spaces left can tell, what vision
the woman artist saw, even now
when pattern is tattered.

Left-Sided Angel to Its Critics
Stephen De Staebler sculpture
Iowa State University

And if I am an angel in descent,
perhaps fallen, in some of its senses,
What did you expect? A neon halo?
Wings with feathers from a dancer's boa?
These are hard times for the spirit — too much
of everything, too much money, lunches
on the university's tab, cocktail
patio parties where whiners impale
olives and gerkins, stab colleagues between
the shoulders blades, slice up their friends,
roast their students over ruby charcoal,
resident novelist, in Mark-Twain-cool-
whites, threatens to put you in his next book —
as a slimy minor character. Look
at yourselves. Who's unimpaired, whole? Surprised,
I watch you watch me through your log-clogged eyes.

Life and Literature in '52

The writers hang out at Kenny's,
watch the massive Wurlitzer's
red, green, blue neon lights,
its automatic chrome turntable
spin round and round like their lives —
"Harbor Lights," "Slow Boat to China,"
and all the other ships
that never sailed
from that college town. Drink beer,
read their stories to each other,
quote Hemingway, think they *are* Hem
or Fitz; the girls are Charlotte,
Lady Bret, Zelda before she went mad.

Jane Austen, out of style,
waits for Thomas Hardy,
ashamed that she envies Torchy
who snuggles in the back booth,
a poet's hand on her knee.

Little River Farm by Yvonne Jacquette

As the plane banks, the earth hangs like a tapestry,
brown plowed fields at the top, yellow cut hay fields below,
bordered by green chenille rows of emerging soy beans.
Red barns with gray roofs, everything miniature
the size of Monopoly buildings, set in a neat barnyard,
cows' feed bunks lined up, white silo, new grove
planted in equidistant rows, two ponds, forked road,
and a milk truck turning into the lane.
The airplane churns through luminous air,
climbs cloud ladders, climbs above them
into the arcs of angels. Below — one kind
of perfection, structured and straight as if the farmer
practiced geometry. But Little River subverts
rectangles, runs diagonally off the canvas at the bottom,
and willows follow the water.

Mural at Santa Maria delle Grazie

Leonardo sees a room
with high-beamed ceilings; windows frame Jerusalem's hills,
which look like the hills of Milano. What were thought
to be doors are really tapestries on the whitewashed walls.
The apostles, except for one, are strong and innocent.
A white linen cloth is laid on the trestle table
for the night of the Passover supper. Leonardo de Vinci
paints gold rimmed tumblers, small loaves of bread,
translucent slices of lemon beside the fish
on white plates, and a bowl of blood oranges.

Naked Artist
Tanabata Festival in a Prospering City

On the 7th day of the 7th month, the star, Vega,
(The Celestial Weaving girl) crosses the Milky Way

to meet her lover the cowherd, Altair,
from whom she has been separated by heavenly anger.

Gods have the right to decree beyond reason.
I understand — mother and father opposed my love, too.

To celebrate the festival, bamboo poles on roof
ladders are tied with poems written on shaped papers,

ground cherry fruits, watermelon slices,
a fish. The accountant's house shows a paper abacus,

a ledger, a money box. This view shows Hiroshige's home
in the far right corner, a blue and white kimono

on a drying pole. I imagine the artist inside,
naked, waiting while sun sucks his clothes,

working with his brushes, pale paints, thin paper.
Nearby lies a gourd flask, a paper sake cup, Hiroshige fond

of drink. At night the Star moves smoothly
on her fine journey across the shining glitter.

Was she happy, looking down at brightly colored papers,
pale poems, the boy in her arms at last?

Am I happy, looking at all the detail a besotted artist
from another country and another era left the world?

When all the lovers have departed, all the interdictions dying
in the wind's arms, what is left but a little color, the imagination?

The Other Over the Shoulder

In one of Rembrandt's forty-five self-portraits,
pen and ink drawing, short, square-cut hair
escapes from a bowl cap. Beneath shaggy brows,
eyes search the distance. The face
growing old. Short bushy beard,
paint brush in the artist's right hand,
Invading the self-portrait, another —
a long-nosed man with eye glasses
looks over the artist's shoulder.

I, too, if I look quickly
before she has time to hide, find
a glint of glasses in my mirror;
if I round a corner quickly,
catch a glimpse of her inquisitive nose.

The Painters

see the Magi, splendid in their rose and orange
and melon green robes riding their great camels
holding baroque boxes, their turbans twined with pearls,
crowns set with amethyst. They look content
and knowing, coming down the winding pathway
to the center of the village where the small
Madonna sits serene with a fat babe on her
lap among the radiance.

The truth was we were scholars
who had read too many books, were careful
not to look rich, wore coarse wool which got dirty,
caravansaries were filthy, full
of fleas and thieves, not the least of which
were the owners. The stable hands knew
more about gambling than about camel galls,
told obscene jokes learned from the soldiers.
The picture so common it
was agony. Still, we were not disappointed;
three professors outwitted Herod, the chosen
lackey of Caesar, and in those venal
and corrupt countries, ourselves, there was
a revolution of hope.

Note
To be published in *South and West.*

Paris, Rainy Day

Where the confluence of cobblestones flows together
at the triangle of the Rue Turin and Rue de Moscou,
one has a choice of great cities, or one can stroll
along beside a mustachioed gentleman whose coat
is open to display his silk vest. He carries
the large umbrella high above his top hat, shelters
the lady holding his arm. He is gazing off
into the distance. Strange that he isn't looking
at her whose small face is lovely.
Did his ship, which was about to come in,
founder and sink? Did he lose at the roulette table
last night? Does he have a guilty secret in his pocket?
Is it raining prohibitions? Obstacles? Or did
Gustave Caillebotte set a challenge for himself
to paint the varnish of rain on the street stones,
the way the wet light illuminates the pergolas of the black umbrellas?
So the pedestrians in the distance, the horse-drawn cabs,
the lonely street lamp and the couple
must wait there forever in the rain coming down in Paris.

Perspectives

To see is to know.
Emily Smith-Watkins

Where is my camera obscura
for finding perspective,
my X-Ray machine to image
the chambers of the heart,
the MRI to show me the channels of thought
inside the cerebellum? The writer
is not painter or doctor, only the lowly technician
of the pen who has great difficulty with spelling.

Pieter Bruegel's *The Adoration of the Magi*

In Pieter Bruegel's *The Adoration of the Magi.*
the prince proffering frankincense has a face,
like an old potato, eyes squint, wrinkled lips.
Middle one on his knees with open casket of gold,
has straggly white hair, pursed mouth.
Third king wears fringed American skins,
band across his brow ornamented with animal teeth,
his face serpentine. Soldierly retinue
wear broad Flemish faces, amazement.
In the stable's brown background,
donkey eats from the manger, oblivious
as the wooden saddle perched on the rafter,
The Virgin, young, serene, tip of her wooden
shoe protrudes beneath her blue cloak.
The babe apprehensive.
Fat, elderly Joseph tilts his head back,
listens to a peasant behind him whisper in his ear.

In Bruegel's self-portrait he drew a paint brush
in the artist's right hand, a face growing old,
eyes looking into the distance beneath
shaggy brows, short bushy beard, short,
square cut hair escaping from a bowl cap,
and behind him, looking over his shoulder,
a long-nosed man with eye glasses.

There is something looking over my shoulder, too,
never speaks or proffers gifts, but I have seen
glint of glasses; in the mirror,
I catch a glimpse of her long nose.

Note
See "The Other Over the Shoulder,"

Price

after a woodcut by Hiroshige

One crane wades in the pond, his beak open,
one dives from the top of the frame.

You can almost hear the whish of wind
through his iridescent white feathers.

The emperor's decree protects these ponds:
no firecrackers, loud noises, especially, no dogs.

They must have tranquility, but it is difficult
to imagine why. When they speak in crane language

they talk dirty, scream, cuss, their voices rough
raucous, the vocabulary of street hoodlums.

Their appetites murderous for small frogs
and silver fish that unsuspectingly swim

near their red toes. Their feathers exquisite,
red crowns, black masks under golden eyes.

They pose in elegant positions. They're so lovely
that later the Shogun will stage a hunt.

Seventy or eighty of his men with hawks
will capture two or three, tie them

to bamboo poles, and take them to Kyoto
Where beauty will extract its price from the beautiful:

The palace cook will transform them
into the emperor's tranquility soup.

Re-gilding the Monuments

Restrained white and pale now,
I like to think of them when their clothes were painted
purple, crimson, indigo, when dark eyebrows and lashes
were drawn on their faces, when vacant sockets
held eyes of amethyst, aquamarine, lapis lazuli.
The Greeks had to invent the golden mean to hold in check
their overflowing passions: unbearable extreme
of Socrates' pure philosophy; Plato's incessant
recording, exquisite music of Sappho's lyrics,
gut-aching laughter from Aristophanes,
Phidias' super colossal gold-and-ivory Athena;
Aristotle's ocean of interests — chicken
embryos, syllogistic logic, patterns
in tragic poetry — before he departed
for Chalcis, refusing the Athenians a chance
to murder another philosopher.

See this power, inspiration, genius,
that had to be circumscribed
or it would have spilled over, inundated the world,
permeated the seas with superfluity too immense to bear.
I like to think of the remaining faded goddesses
when they wore carmine lips, gilded toe and fingernails
at Point Sounion above the Aegean where it hurtles against
the stones, bellows, breaks,
then retreats, still insistently susurrus,
whispering, excesses, excesses, excesses.

Rembrandt and Hopper
Etchings at the Des Moines Art Museum

Rembrandt's *Landscape with a Cow Drinking*
displays thatched house, barn among trees,
quiet stream, lethargic bulk of the cow;
this is contentment recollected. It was probably never
quite this good. You know the cow balked at milking,
switched her scratchy tail in the milkmaid's face,
waited, seemed compliant, then suddenly kicked,
overturning the full bucket. Still, in the pasture
she looks wholesome as summer, sweet as cream;
she produced a calf every spring, let down
more foaming, warm white milk
than any other cow in the herd.

Edward Hopper's *American Landscape*
shows cows climbing a railroad embankment
to cross the tracks to home — upper story
of a New England farm house visible
above the unnatural welt on the landscape.
You know these animals are in danger
from steel tracks, iron locomotive,
technology which will send the people in the house
to the mills, to the enormous racket of factories,
to lonely diners where they will drink their coffee black
in company of empty chairs, bare tables,
the poverty of night, cut off from placid pastures,
hay-scented barns, the care of animals
which companions all creatures,
assuages some of the sorrow of being human.

Reproach to Yeats

With my body, I thee worship. This was power
for us. My love, I could have been
Zoroastrian, bowing for *a* holy hour
before the fires of youth. My blood
rushing at your slightest touch was gold and flame.
Although I gave my body care
externally, what grew old was the heart's bright frame.
Now the sea will not give up its dead.
Oh God, I wish that it had not been written;
I wish that it had not been said.

Second Sight

Revising is finding what you already know
but didn't recognize; it's trying new words
on for size, it's the wind's blow, the rain's squeak
under the wipers, the old lover whom
you'll never meet again in this life or the next.
It's excising pretense, pretext, wordiness
and worldliness, aiming for the jugular
of pure hate blood, of perfect gaudiness,
of love beyond love where no word goes,
or eating bitter herbs, tasting jaggery sugar.
Revising is seeing what only the blind eye sees,
hearing from the deaf ear, oh constructing nets
to catch music of despair and ecstasy, pain —
to tug dark night's wildness back again.

Sestina for the Iowa Arts Council

In that glittering city of high art, Des Moines,
I listened all day to endless explanations of administrators
from the Iowa Arts Council, all of whom meant well
and all of whom tried to do a good job.
But they may eventually kill art
by talking it to death

or by concocting forms that will choke it to death.
In the shadow of the legislature in Des Moines
under the gold-leaf Capitol dome, they justify art;
they save potters, musicians, writers — these administrators,
giving artistically-proficient, business-deficient artists jobs
which they better do well.

Nobody knows how well
except the endless papers and reports that lead to death
or to the next State Center, Coon Rapids, Bettendorf job,
all kept in faceless filing cabinets in Des Moines
and watched over by zealous administrators
who exist at arm's length, spirit's span, from art.

Their credentials: failure as artists. Their present art,
to convince nursing homes, detention centers, schools, how well
art and artists enhance institutions. Art administrators —
they get health care packages, eventual pensions, even death
benefits, although some say that death in Des Moines
is the same as life there, whether one works or loafs on the job,

Still, as a writer, my job
is to be patient with the mechanics of art,
to learn to love the Arts Council in Des Moines,
to practice my craft as well
as I can during a residency in Columbus Junction or death,
whichever comes first, granted me by the administrators.

Actually, I have great affection for the administrators;
organizing wild and wily artists constitutes a zany job
which must often make death
seem preferable, and if art
is served (whether weak soup or hearty beef, roasted well),
both artists and the villages they go to can thank Des Moines.

In heaven no one is allowed to be an administrator for art.
There the artists jam with the Gourd boys, do their job well,
dance after death, released from Des Moines.

Shaker Baskets

Shaker baskets were woven over molds
so they came out even, symmetrical, pure,
like the dances in the evening.
Men on one side of the room,
women on the other —
the wind of the spirit
bends them like willows.

Sherlock Struthers Solves
The Mystery of the Missing Rabbit
and the Rabbit Poem

White Rabbit in the Snow was anchored in earth
beside the metal sculpture, Yellow Tulip,
but prankster, pledge, or art lover purloined

it. To mark the rabbit's loss, tell its worth
Neal Bowers penned a poem. Lynn Pohlman hired
it engraved on bronze to mark the place and joined

it to concrete, but strong thieves pried it loose.
Ag students are suspected for their lack
of reverence, decorum, their prolonged

campus high jinks, but rumors hint at much worse.
Some blame the native brown rabbits. Did they tear
apart the stoney one, traitor to their kind?

Or whispers say monstrous swine escaped their berths
and killed it? Or that Old Reactor's spent waste
nuked the beast, burned the poem? I enjoin

the gossips. Here's the truth: For the sheer mirth
of it, the Tulip (leaves like knives, petals fork)
consumed them both on dark nights and LEFT NO SIGN.

Sirius Looks Down

Sirius looks down on the fundamentalists,
the righteous ones who would save all non-believers
from their mistakes by killing them,
letting their blood puddle where the street dogs
can lap at it and worry their heretic bones.

Sirius looks, too, on the old river worshipers
who flick water at each other on the day
of the spring solstice.
The Zoroastrians have not given up
the worship of fire. They bless the kindling,
sanctify the coals, and bonfires still flare
from their fingers, flicker from their irises.
The druids worship trees. I could be a druid,
having lived so long on the bare, wind-whipped prairies.

Oh, fundamentalists, life is fundamental,
breathing, eating, drinking, loving is fundamental:
Freedom, sweet as the wind from the cedars
of Lebanon; learning — wrestling, not with angels,
but with great ideas. And Art:
The black bull from Lascaux, the bison charging
on the wall in the Shaft of the Dead Man,
The frieze of horses at Les Combarelles;
the little Celtic horse, the Tarpan, the wild ass.
The Chapel of the Mammoths
from Pech-Merle, the spotted horses,
and the painted stags, still running.

The stories the cave people told around the campfire
are still our stories: children's mistakes, savage sounds
in the night, the great beauty chooses
the wrong husband, the hunter escapes the attack,
the hero's exploits, and the beloved's death
from which you never recover.

So It Would Be Remembered

'Truth will come to light.'
Shakespeare

So it would be remembered, Buffalo Bill
helped make a film reconstructing
battles of Summit, Little Bighorn,
and Wounded Knee. Sioux extras
didn't want to film the fight
over the grave where frozen braves were buried
twenty-three years before.
Some said the Indians were going to use
live ammunition in their Winchesters,
but Bill palavered with them,
made peace. Still, both sides
reluctant to start firing at each other
with blanks when the camera started rolling.
Ghost bullets.

General Miles didn't like the way
the Army was portrayed,
and so the film was lost forever.
Ghost film.
But truth cannot be erased from the landscape;
it coasts across the prairies
in every winter snow.
blows with wild plum blossoms
in Spring, with Summer's moon clover
in the grass. Milkweed floss in Fall floats
from its cool wings, the ghost of truth.

Star Bach

The star folk tune bassoons, oboes, drums, harps,
and violins for music of the spheres.
Hip hop, rap, rock, move them to starry tears
who've heard Bach play the organ at Weimar.

They know the ending of *The Art of Fugue,*
although Bach died before he finished it.
For cheer they hum it sometimes in concert
to lift the clouds that cover their dark moods.

His notes, like purple plums, smooth, ripe, and big
for choral voices — *Mass in B Minor*
that made violas and bases shudder —
and his patron, Leopold, in Leipzig

These move stars still. They count them as a gift
and the *Toccatas in D minor* and in *F.*

Thieves

Janus Agari-Altar
Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa

This double bronze is also
double bass when Michael Carey
and Neal Bowers one winter afternoon rub
their gloves across its striations, pluck music
from its hollows, tap its sounding board
for gongs, cymbals, kettle drums.
Their rhythms resound in this Agronomy Quadrant,
poets making themselves heard, stealing art
from musicians and sculptors (The pickpockets
of Paris are amateurs compared to the poets.)

I have stolen the music from Michael
and Neal, which they stole from the sculptor,
Beverly Pepper, which she stole from John Deere,
and the inventor of snow plows, the inventor
of Roman gods, and a few others, exiled, perhaps,
on Easter Island or repining in one of Dante's
fire-forged circles. I have stolen
two or three minutes from your left wrist.
I intend to steal more if I can.
But I am giving you something, too,
something changeable and unchanging,
metaphor, music, instrumentation.

Three Visions

I
Cheyenne Camp Attacked at Powder River

The Leading Man of the Kit Fox Society wears
the war bonnet, eagle feathers trailing
to the ground, thrusts forth the bow-lance,
shielding himself and his followers
from the rain of bullets dropping
all around them, their faith so enormous
it protects even the horse.

II
Scene from the Battle of the Little Big Horn

Amos Bad Heart Buffalo knew warriors
who fought at Little Bighorn,
depicts blue and green horses with tails knotted
and tied with two eagle feathers.
Chaos — and victims on the ground,
red seeping from uniforms.
At the edge of the canvas,
U.S. Army soldiers transfixed
in astonishment.

III
Custer 's Last Fight

Anheuser-Busch Brewing Association's poster
portrays Heroic Custer, saber uplifted,
standing among the dead and dying, dispatching
an Indian, although we know Custer lost,
and the blue-eyed glamour boy died
in his own blood like all the young soldiers
he led into ambush, his ego as thick
as his golden curls which Rain-in-the-Face
wore on his belt after the battle.

Through the Picture to the Other Side
Kiyomizu Hall and Shinobazu Pond at Ueno

Hiroshige was not completely honest with us.
He extends the shrine's red viewing veranda, making it wider.

Above the temple, above the cherry trees
pines tower, higher than pines grow, lifting bristly tops.

One is a moon pine, a branch growing downward
and then up, forming a circle. It could not be natural

but contrived, as shrubs are clipped into animals shapes,
into such contortions that we call the pain beauty.

Toward the left is the causeway, built by laborers
carrying baskets of earth on their heads

to the island where a small temple to Benton, the water god,
looks out over the calm pond, the right place to make a god happy.

We look down at small figures about to enter the major shrine
where resides the thousand-armed Kannon.

The truth of the vision is not in nature or wildness —
or over the bridge to the artificially shaped or impossibly armed.

The truth of the vision lies beyond the picture
Somewhere to the South or North

atop Mt. Fuji or in the bottom of the sea.
We have seen only a glimpse of its shining.

To Andrew Wyeth

I saw your sad barns,
Your smutted corn,
Andrew Wyeth.

And I remembered
Old Jake Skonkweller,
Clamping down on his cigar.
He stood in our warm barn,
Scratched his fat belly,
And looked at the horses:
Shorty and Bird, the massive
Strawberry roans; Beersheba
And Dan, the Belgians;
And Queenie, heavy with foal —
Their brushed flanks gleaming,
Their manes braided with ribbons
We girls had tied there.

Your battered pail, turned
Upside down on the fence post, feels
The cold northern light.

"Don't worry, Al," Old Jake
Said to my dad, "These beauties
Are just what they need in the vineyards
In New York state."

He was lying.
We all knew it,
But we had to pretend he wasn't.

Your brush paints true
Andrew Wyeth.

Transforming the *Three-Way Plug*

Soft Sculpture by Claus Oldenburg
Des Moines Art Museum

This baggy beast, only one ever stuffed,
the blue nauga, underdeveloped elephant,
plastic bulk without a trunk

has the waiting aperture
where trunk should be inferred
and for tusks, two rectangulars

left for completion by the crowd here,
and on top, suggestion of a howdah.
He's quiet, this one, no growler —

disposition easy, laid back.
We will ride together after
his soft prongs become solid, fatter,

Transformed to legs; we'll move across entire
continents, past volcanoes smoking fire
toward the jungles of hot wires.

The Little Street
Vermeer

What is it
about the broken red tiles
above the doorways, the cracks
in the brick façades repaired
with gray mortar like the cracks
in life? More clouds
than blue in the Dutch sky,
still, a woman sits in the doorway
sewing, for clothes must be mended,
the hired girl must bend over the barrel
to dip out water to heat
for the laundry. Two children
hunch close to the pavement, intent on their game.

In Vermeer's household where his ten children
must have cried, quarreled, taken sick — in that house
four children die —
where money is scarce and his colleagues' regard
does not buy bread, he creates serenity,
order, the holiness of the ordinary.
He paints that certain slant of light
which illuminates more than an obscure street
in a provincial town, transcends
time and place, sorrow and joy —
that translucent something
we recognize
although we cannot name it.

Vermeer's View of Delft

After the bloody wounded staggering
through the streets, the iron occupation,
after the sieges, after the Great Wars,
the brutal Spanish soldiers
are finally defeated, kicked out.
Vermeer paints on a day when
the only troops are cumulous clouds marching
across the sky above his small Dutch town.

He shows dark swags shading
the ancient city walls,
but he leaves the foreground
and the canal's sand
lit by the intermittent sun.
He flattens Delft's façade,
allows the light to illuminate Nieuwe Kerk's
bell tower, glaze the yellow wall
behind Schiedam Gate.
He straightens the bowed bridge,
roughens red tile roofs' texture
with sand and white lead lumps,
heightens contours of buildings
with a pale line, makes
flickering reflections shine from the water.
Vermeer layers the paint,
applies opaque highlights wet-in-wet
until it glows like nacre.

He finds the place
where sun gilds the steeple's upside down funnel,
where boats, anchored in the harbor's
ocher and blue shadows, wear strings
of luminous pearls.

Viewing *Christ Walking on the Water* on Good Friday

This year of our Lord, 1990,
a cold, rainy Good Friday;
think of the two Marys' grief,
those poor women, his fishermen
who understood no more than I do,
see them clustered around the cross,
the disciples hoping for miracles,
because they remember miracles,

remember the fishing boat; a black gale,
waves slamming over the gunnels, sail ripped,
rigging wrenched loose, whipping their faces,
the boat foundering, and then
they hear a familiar voice;
wind soughs, abates; wave smooth out
as if by an enormous hand;
his figure appears, walks toward them,
moon shining through him,
washed in the clear water.

I stop here a moment before this painting,
give thanks for the miracles
on these walls —
other times, places, people resurrected.

Watching for Dancing Partners
sculpture by Allan Houser
Museum of the Southwest
Midland, Texas

Two Indian girls bend together,
wrapped in long, fringed shawls,
heavy crosses on their sturdy necks,
centuries of concealed emotions in their cheek bones,
schooled impassivity in the tilt of their chins.
Their faces turn upward,
not ready to reveal expectation.
They do not smile, their smiles buried
beneath their stone lips
can wait a thousand years,
but a dancing wind blows their long, marble skirts.

Wide-eyed Women with Big Breasts
Sigaria Rock

Mural ladies you wade in clouds up to the fold
Wide-eyed Women with Big Breasts in your sarongs,
which are tucked just below your navels,
and some of you float through cloud seas,
your enormous bare breasts acting as life jackets, keeping you upright,
flowers in your hair — elliptical eyes
on the sides of your heads.

Some of you fly like egrets
and on the mirror wall opposite.
ancient men wrote love poems to you;
women invoked your blessing.

Somewhere in the plain below
lies the ancient dust of the artist,
maybe in the paddy fields
where slender stalks
sway in the mango wind,

Woodcuts
a ghazal

On my way home from the library, looking up
at the apple blossoms, I tripped, fell on Hiroshige.

Bridges arch their backs; armor-hanging pine
spreads its black bristles; stream meanders, unconcerned.

Two small fishing boats tow metal baskets
burning kindling to attract fish on Edo Bay.

Plum trees pruned, amputated limbs are dark skeletons.
They sprout new shoots, white petals, against a red sky.

Fireworks fly like finches over Sumida River,
fiery one descends above the black bridge.

A geisha follows the lantern of her attendant,
the night scene sprinkled with mica dust.

Oh, Hiroshige, your woodcuts show rain in streaks
and the way women bow their heads, trudging against it.

***Woman Before an Aquarium* by Henri Matisse**

Pine cones swim
among green branches;
the thin arms of the brown-haired woman
rest on the table; her chin
rests on her hand. She watches
the gold fish in a round aquarium,
her eyes fish, aqueous and indolent,
the translucent dance of fins,
the dance of the imagination,
like the small promise that holds the glass bowl
together, that holds the earth in orbit,
and leashes errant moons whose patterns
appear on the screen behind her.

Seven for the Departure

Across the river without a name,	Marilyn Hacker
The greenness of night lies on the page and goes	
Down deeply in the empty glass...	Wallace Stevens
.. .straight to Homer/three miles down....	Maura Stanton
Yet, living in two worlds, impenitent,	Wallace Stevens
The bells keep on repeating solemn names.	
And for a moment we are filled with joy,	
radiant and deceptive	Wistana Syzamborska
Against the waning light, but just for a moment.	Mark Strand
And coming to a chapter left unwritten...	Stephen Spender
The dreamer sleeps forever with the dreamed.	
Echoing through skies of ice	
the storm before the calm,	Wistana Syzamborska
Littered with stars, ...	Mark Strand
... existence has its own reason for being	Wistana Syzamborska
... astonishing / in memory as old love	
reopened, still quivering.	Amy Clampitt
It was the hour that seemed to say	Stephen Spender
... She was a great beauty, forty years ago.	
Is it luck / no one gets her old life back?	Marilyn Hacker

Skin is the only safe country,	Maura Stanton
a shivering, rain-speckled ... dark garden of the inevitable.	Amy Clampitt
There isn't a single bird left in our voice of departure	Mahmoud Darwish
It is an illusion that we were ever alive,	Wallace Stevens
that we always had been strangers.	Amy Clampitt
Caught in the sensual music, all neglect	Marilyn Hacker
Water will be my vision, subject, and my language	Mahmoud Darwish
Across that river without a name....	Marilyn Hacker